

FLOOR SPEECH
GOVERNMENT REFORM
March 6, 2019

Mr. President. I rise today for the people.

Today, in this country, there is a deep disconnect between what the American people are demanding from their leaders and what the president and Congress have been giving them.

Poll after poll shows that the American people want affordable health care.

Yet the Republican Leadership and this president have tried time and time again to take away health care rights and protections.

Poll after poll shows that the American people want good paying jobs.

Yet the Republican leadership and this president gave a massive tax windfall to the wealthiest individuals and biggest corporations.

Poll after poll shows that the American people want clean air and clean water. They want Congress to tackle climate change. They want to protect our public lands.

Yet for years, the Republican leadership has done the opposite. And the Trump administration is dismantling environmental protections and sabotaging our efforts to fight climate change.

Poll after poll shows the American people support common sense gun safety laws.

Yet -- for decades -- the Republican leadership has refused to take any action whatsoever on even the most basic safety laws, like universal background checks.

And poll after poll shows that the American people want DREAMers to stay in our country. They don't want children separated from their parents. They want comprehensive immigration reform to fix our broken system.

And yet, the Republican leadership has opposed these priorities for many years -- and now, this president moves forward with his divisive and hateful immigration policies.

So it's no wonder that trust in government is so low. According to a recent survey just 19 percent overall trust the government to do what is right.

Root canals, famously, have a higher approval rating than Congress.

We are a representative democracy. Yet the people are not being represented. Their will has been stymied.

The situation has gotten dramatically worse under this president -- no doubt about it. But these problems precede this president. And they will live on long after his time in office, unless we act.

Because, to put it bluntly, some of our most basic democratic institutions are broken.

Our voting rights system. Our campaign finance system. Our ethics rules.

The American people know in their gut that the system is rigged.

That's why the drug companies get what they want, and people pay through the nose.

That's why the millionaires and billionaires get more tax cuts, and the working people get left behind.

That's why the polluters get off scot-free and the rest of us get dirty air and contaminated water.

Unrigging this system requires reform. Real reform. So we bring power back to the hands of everyday Americans. And out of the hands of the special, moneyed interests that rule Washington.

So let's talk about how we do that.

For years, I've stood with others in this chamber to call for a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United*. For independent, non-partisan drawing of House districts. For closing the "revolving door" in Washington.

In the past, some Senate Republicans were independent of their leadership and supported these ideas. The president even promised to "drain the swamp."

Unfortunately, as we all know by now, that promise was empty.

But with the change in leadership in the House of Representatives, Congress is now making progress to enact the reforms that the American people want.

The House will soon pass H.R. 1, the For the People Act – a major reform package to fix our broken system.

It will be up to the Senate to follow suit.

So next week my Senate colleagues and I will introduce our own “ For the People” Act -- a comprehensive set of reforms to move this effort forward. I hope we’ll have bipartisan support.

But I was disappointed to hear the Republican Leader deride this essential reform bill “The Democrat Politician Protection Act.” That is not only a sadly political comment, but it’s also cynical -- and totally misses the point.

Especially when you consider that the American people overwhelmingly – across party lines -- support these kinds of reforms. It’s the special interests who oppose them. Because they are threatened by them.

If the Republican Leader feels the same way about this bill as the special interests do, perhaps the bill is not the problem.

Every member of the Senate will have a choice. Do they support reform? Where our ideas and policies can compete on a level playing field?

Or do they choose to side with the special interests? To do their bidding in return for their protection and money during election season?

I've known plenty of Republicans who opposed this system. Senator John McCain was one of them. Senator Alan Simpson is another. Senator Cochran cosponsored my constitutional amendment.

No party has to side with the big money and special interests. It is a choice.

It's a choice we must make together – to return our democracy to the people. To rid our system of corruption.

This bill will do just that. It will make easier, not harder, to vote. It will bring an end to the dominance of big money in politics. And it will ensure that politicians actually serve the public interest.

First, voting rights.

For 50 years, The Voting Rights Act of 1965 years has stood as a bulwark against voter suppression tactics and enfranchised millions of voters.

But, in 2013, the Supreme Court eviscerated it in its *Shelby County v. Holder* decision -- unleashing a torrent of state laws designed to suppress the vote of minorities. The Court's 5 to 4 decision rendered the Voting Rights Act's pre-clearance provisions ineffective and cleared the way for states to engage in voter suppression.

Since *Shelby*, nearly one thousand polling places have been closed across the country -- many in southern black communities. Voter ID laws have tightened. Early voting has been slashed.

Voter rolls have been purged. And House districts have been redrawn to dilute the minority vote.

One of the many egregious example is North Carolina. Less than two months after *Shelby*, that state enacted far-reaching voter suppression requirements.

North Carolina's law was struck down by a federal court of appeals -- finding the law targeted African Americans "with almost surgical precision."

Just this last midterm -- we saw voter suppression tactics surge.

For instance, in North Dakota, the state legislature passed a law right before the November election that took aim squarely at the Native vote. The law required voter IDs to list physical addresses . . . an impossibility for many Native American voters living on reservations. A federal court found that 5,000 Native American voters did not have the necessary identification.

We have no choice but to respond -- and to restore the Voting Rights Act -- so states are stopped from closing off the franchise.

That must also include the Native American Voting Rights Act -- to address voter suppression tactics in Indian Country, and make sure the Native vote is counted, not discounted.

Bills to restore lost voting rights protections have been introduced in both chambers. I hope the Senate majority will work in a bipartisan way to restore this landmark legislation.

And we should make it easier for voters to register, not harder. In a healthy democracy, automatic voter registration, online voter registration, and same-day voter registration for eligible voters would not be controversial.

Voting should be easy. Too often, for too many, it is hard. It's our duty to fix that. This bill will do that.

Extreme political gerrymandering continues to skew state and Congressional elections. Results from legislative races don't reflect the proportion of each party's voters.

Voters should choose their representatives -- not the other way around.

Congress must direct non-partisan, independent line-drawing in each state to draw Congressional districts.

And congressional districts must fairly reflect states' racial compositions -- so our representative government truly represents the electorate.

There is no other way to put it: Our campaign finance system is broken.

The Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision opened the floodgates for unlimited contributions and dark money. And this Congress's negligence has allowed the flood to drown out regular people's voices.

Super PACs can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money on candidates. The super-wealthy can and do try to buy elections.

Dark money groups can receive unlimited amounts of money from big corporations and wealthy individuals, spend their unlimited sums to influence elections – and never disclose their donors. Or what they wanted in return for their investment.

\$1.4 billion dollars was spent on the last presidential race, in 2016. This midterm's outside expenditures topped a billion dollars.

The system is rigged right before our eyes.

How do we reverse course and return elections to the American people?

For starters, Congress needs to shine a light on the dark money -- and require real time disclosure. Close loopholes that allow foreign money. And create a small donor, public matching fund system for everyday Americans' contributions.

And – most critically -- we must overturn *Citizens United* and related decisions. A Supreme Court that equates big money with free speech . . . as put up campaigns for sale to the highest bidder.

Once again, I will offer an amendment to the Constitution to overturn *Citizens United*, as I have since 2016.

Congress has a long way to go to push our popularity above a root canal . . . and restore the public's confidence.

We also need comprehensive ethics reform. Elected officials and public servants should not reap huge personal profit from their public positions.

We need to tighten the revolving door. We need to tighten lobbying disclosure laws.

And we must require presidential and vice-presidential candidates to disclose their tax returns. Beyond that, presidents and vice presidents must divest of any and all assets that create a conflict of interest.

Candidate Trump promised to disclose his tax returns. He didn't. He then promised to disclose them after an alleged "audit." He hasn't.

This is unacceptable.

We know the president has business and financial ties with Russia and Saudi Arabia, and this may well explain his strange closeness with Vladimir Putin and Mohammed bin Salman.

Transparency and divestiture are the only ways to avoid conflicts of interest and corruption.

These issues go to the heart of what it means to be an American. Our democracy is supposed to exist by the will of the people. By the consent of the governed.

Congress has an amazing opportunity before it. The House of Representatives is starting debate on its comprehensive reform package. My colleagues and I will introduce our legislation next week.

To Republicans around the country — don't fall for the Majority Leader's cynical name-calling. I know you love your democracy as much as I do.

This is not about protecting Democrats or Republicans. It's about protecting Americans from a rigged system.

Let us commit to work together to pass reforms the American people hunger for.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.